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SUBJECT: CODEL PRICE: COLOMBIANS EMPHASIZE DEFENSE COOPERATION, FREE  
TRADE AND REELECTION

REF: A)BOGOTA 2563 B)STATE 80752 C)07 BOGOTA 6697

Summary

1. (U) The House Democracy Assistance Commission (HDAC) visited Colombia from August 20-23. Led by Chairman David Price, HDAC met with President Uribe and Colombian Congressional leadership, including the Senate and House Foreign Affairs committees. President Uribe highlighted the successes of Plan Colombia and explained his recent trip through the region to reduce tensions caused by the pending U.S.-Colombia Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA). Colombian Congressional leaders emphasized the DCA, Free Trade Agreement, state of their Congress, and the referendum for President Uribe's possible third term. In Cartagena, the delegation visited USAID programs for demobilized child soldiers and income generation activities for internally displaced populations. The delegation also met with the Mayor of Cartagena regarding her development vision for the city and witnessed the Colombian Maritime counter-narcotics interdiction work on the Caribbean Coast. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) In addition to HDAC Chairman David Price (D-North Carolina), the HDAC delegation included: ranking Republican David Dreier (R-CA), Jim McDermott (D-WA), Lois Capps (D-CA), Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA), Sam Farr (D-CA), Ed Whitfield (R-KY) and Brian Bilbray (R-CA). This visit followed up on HDAC's visit in 2007 (ref C) to assess the need for continuing HDAC technical assistance to the Colombian Congress.

PRESIDENT URIBE ADVOCATING IN REGION FOR U.S. COOPERATION

3. (U) President Alvaro Uribe recited the achievements of ten years of Plan Colombia, a model example of how the United States can help others in the region facing similar threats, and profusely thanked the United States for being Colombia's only constant friend in the fights against drugs and terrorism. He called the pending Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) "a new standard" in such cooperation and summarized the results of his whirlwind tour to consult with seven UNASUR presidents. His common refrain in those encounters was that Plan Colombia has not harmed any country, but rather has been an indirect benefit to the region. Chairman Price thanked President Uribe for his hard work in negotiating the agreement and in defending it throughout the region.

4. (U) Asked about the pending U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA), President Uribe assessed that many businesses are awaiting its fate before choosing to invest in Colombia. He called the FTA

"the benchmark" for convincing many other countries to sign FTAs with Colombia. Queried by the CODEL about violence against labor unionists, Uribe described his government's efforts to solve such crimes and to prevent future occurrences of violence, including investing 44 million U.S. dollars in protection programs that include 2,000 unionists. President Uribe told the delegation he was confident that President Obama would press for a vote on the FTA once he received the right indications from Congress.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEES PRESS FOR  
FTA APPROVAL IN LIGHT OF DCA BACKLASH  
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15. (SBU) The Foreign Affairs committees of the House and Senate raised the DCA and the FTA, two key issues of concern in the Colombian Congress. The presidents of those committees emphasized that passage of the FTA is more important than ever due to the regional backlash from the DCA, tense trade relations with Venezuela, and Colombia's fight against guerrillas and narcotrafficking. House Committee President Manuel Jose Vives added that Colombia has made improvements with respect to human rights, decreasing homicides of labor unionists, and controlling extrajudicial killings. Regarding delays in FTA approval, Representative Bilbray expressed concern that USG credibility has been affected.

HDAC TRANSITIONS RELATIONSHIP WITH COLOMBIAN  
CONGRESS BEYOND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE  
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16. (U) The Delegation told Senate President Javier Enrique Caceres and House President Edgar Alfonso Gomez in separate meetings that technical assistance programs might not be well-suited for Colombia given that the Colombian Congress already has a good staff structure, committee system, and procedural rules. Caceres and Gomez both agreed and the delegation suggested that the relationship should transition into a broader dialogue and exchange of views on more substantive and thematic issues, perhaps among counterpart committees. In response to a question from Congresswoman Capps, Caceres said there was a need to address the lack of adequate female representation in the Colombian Congress in order to make it more diverse and inclusive. On the reelection referendum that would allow President Uribe to run for a third term, Caceres believed that Congress should approve so as to not get in the way of what should ultimately be a question for the Colombian people.

HOUSE PRESIDENT NOTES WEAKENED CONGRESS AND  
THE NEED TO CONTINUE URIBE POLICIES AND FTA  
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17. (U) House President Edgar Alfonso Gomez acknowledged that it has been a difficult period for the Colombian Congress due to the parapolitical scandal where many members have been investigated, some indicted and convicted, for ties to paramilitary groups. He added that Congress needs to rebuild credibility and regain the confidence of the Colombian people, becoming more representative and inclusive. Gomez said the re-election referendum has paralyzed Congress, stalling important legislation, and ultimately Congress needs to move past it and on to other important issues.

18. (SBU) Gomez stressed the importance of concluding the FTA. He then stated that the FARC, who have been severely weakened during the current administration, hope for a change of government or at least a change in government policies. As such, although perpetuating one man in power may have its risks for the country, President Uribe's policies must be allowed to continue. According to Gomez, the FARC is no longer an ideological, but rather a strictly criminal-terrorist organization. He thanked the United States for its support, which has played a critical role in weakening the FARC.

PROSECUTOR GENERAL HIGHLIGHTS SUCCESS  
OF U.S. SUPPORTED LABOR VIOLENCE SUB-UNIT  
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19. (SBU) Acting Prosecutor General Guillermo Mendoza Diago thanked the delegation for ongoing USG support to assist his office's

efforts to legally and efficiently confront Colombia's major judicial challenges. Chairman Price noted the work of the USG-supported special labor violence sub-unit was a particular focus of the visit. Human Rights Unit Head Sandra Castro underscored the sub-unit's progress in investigating and prosecuting labor crimes since its creation in October 2006. Out of 207 convictions since 2000 in labor crimes cases, 76 percent or 156 convictions are the result of the work of the sub-unit. The delegation was impressed with Colombia's progress in prosecuting labor crimes, noting that it could help the FTA's prospects in the U.S. Congress.

¶10. (SBU) Castro attributed the sub-unit's success to the Fiscalía's (Prosecutor General's office) commitment, training, improved technical capabilities of prosecutors and investigators, and structural changes such as the move to the accusatory system. Castro reported that 139 individuals--including intellectual authors--are now incarcerated for labor crimes. She added that 70 convictions of the above 156 convictions are related to 185 priority cases jointly identified by labor unions and the Fiscalía. Representatives Price and Farr emphasized the importance of correct, universally understood reports that demonstrate the sub-unit's progress. (NOTE: The Fiscalía is working with the Embassy to provide such a report based on Castro's presentation to share with CODEL.)

#### MEMBERS EXPERIENCE THE BENEFITS OF USAID PROGRAMS IN CARTAGENA

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¶11. (U) In Cartagena, the CODEL visited a USAID supported Colombian NGO, Granitos de Paz, which provides support to internally displaced families and vulnerable populations in a marginalized neighborhood on the outskirts of the city. The delegation met with beneficiaries of programs for vocational education; senior citizen health and nutrition; and assistance to improve or construct homes and grow productive backyard gardens. One beneficiary hosted members in her

new cement home and showed them a photo of the decrepit shack she used to live in for years on the same plot of land before receiving assistance. She cried as she thanked the delegation for its support to Granitos de Paz, which she said had been instrumental in giving her and her children a new life.

¶12. (U) The delegation also met with youth at risk of recruitment by illegal armed groups and former child soldiers who have been receiving assistance from Colombia's Escuela Taller, a vocational skills training center for underprivileged kids, supported through USAID's Child Soldiers Program. The program provides income generation opportunities for participating youth, while strengthening their ability to successfully reintegrate socially into the community. Program operators told the delegation that over 31,000 members of the AUC paramilitaries have collectively demobilized and the Ministry of Defense reports that its "Deserter Program" has certified over 19,400 individuals who have individually demobilized or deserted from different illegal armed groups between August 2002 and July 2009. Furthermore, desertion rates from the ranks of the remaining illegal armed groups increased dramatically in 2007 (3,192) and 2008 (3,461) and have maintained a rate of over 200 per month in 2009, primarily from the FARC. The grateful youth said the vocational training courses provide them with sufficient knowledge to start their own business and pursue their personal goals.

#### FAST BOATS LEADING TO SUCCESS IN INTERDICTION

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¶13. (U) HDAC visited the Colombian Navy Base which leads efforts to halt drug traffickers' increasing seaborne shipments. Members experienced a demonstration of the maritime counter-narcotics interdiction through Fast Boats, an increasingly vital tool to combating drug trafficking. The Fast Boats have led to unparalleled success in 2008, with record seizures of cocaine on the high seas complementing a record year in coca eradication.

#### MAYOR OF CARTAGENA HIGHLIGHTS DIVIDED CITY

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¶14. (U) Cartagena's charismatic and dynamic mayor, Judith del Carmen

Pindeo, shared her message of reuniting the two Cartagena's--rich and poor--divided by a social and economic gap that separates the city. She added that the poor are predominantly part of the Afro-Colombian population. Mayor Pinedo addressed the importance of international cooperation reaching Cartagena and Colombia.

NATIONAL CONSOLIDATION & CSDI  
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¶15. (U) Members also were briefed through the new Regional Coordination Center based in Cartagena on the National Consolidation Plan (PNC) and the Embassy's Colombia Strategic Development Initiative (CSDI) regions. The Center provides a single entity to coordinate multiple Government of Colombia institutions towards guaranteeing a sustainable presence of the Colombian government in conflict areas in order to defeat illicit crops, narcotrafficking and terrorism.

¶16. (U) CODEL Price cleared this message.

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